



## Using Premortems to Anticipate Problems

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### ***How to anticipate problems and failure before they occur.***

We are all familiar with post-mortems and forensic examinations from all the TV crime series. Post-mortems are good for telling you what went wrong, why it went wrong, and the consequences of things going wrong (death in this instance) – but it doesn't change the fact that the individual is still dead. It is case of being wise after the event but being wise after the event doesn't stop or prevent things happening.

Pre-mortems are different. Pre-mortems are a great way to assess and think through a potential strategy or a negotiation. It is about being wise before the event. Gather your team together and take them through the following exercise:

### **Andrew's Five Steps in Carrying Out a Premortem**

**Step 1: *Select a prospective strategy.*** Make sure you have a clear description of the strategic initiative.

**Step 2: *Set the scene.*** You are a year in the future after you have implemented the strategy. Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong. To call it an unmitigated disaster would be kind. It is a total catastrophe and it has very serious consequences on the organization. People are not talking to each other. It has gone beyond being embarrassing. You know what has happened, but not why.

**Step 3: *Generate reasons for failure.*** Give everybody in the room three minutes to write down on post-it notes all the reasons why they think this strategic initiative failed. Do this without talking or discussing, this allows everyone to contribute their ideas and intuition. This allows you to capture and utilize the unique blend of experiences, mental models and insights that each person has.

**Step 4: *Share the reasons.*** Go around the group and get everybody, in turn, to share and explain one reason at a time. Stick all the notes on the wall or whiteboard. As a group get



them to group any common or shared reasons. This helps you to identify the key reasons why the strategic initiative might fail.

**Step 5: Reassess the strategic initiative.** In the light of what has been uncovered, identify what will need to be changed about the strategy to improve it. How will this impact other strategic initiatives, and what are the consequences? Remember, good strategy consists of strategic initiatives that interlink and leverage each other, they do not stand alone.

Benefits of using pre-mortems include:

- Stopping people and teams from becoming over-confident, encouraging a more realistic assessment of risk
- Allowing people to voice their concerns and to share insights and experiences.
- Helping teams to worry about the right things.
- Allows you to regularly visit your strategy and anticipate problems.
- Helps you to prepare backup plans and exit strategies.
- It allows you to highlight factors that will influence success or failure, which may increase your ability to control the results.

So, look at one of your strategies and carry out a premortem – what will you find?